

ARTICLE APPEARED

ON PAGE A-31

NEW YORK TIMES
14 February, 1985

ESSAY | William Safire

Taking the War Private

WASHINGTON
Let's talk sense about paying the bills for the war now being conducted by the "contras" against the Communist regime in Nicaragua.

Until a few months ago, the Reagan policy was to finance the military harassment of Nicaragua until the Sandinistas were ready to make a deal to stop trying to export revolution to their neighbors. When our military pressure and diplomatic demarches were mocked by Sandinista dickering with Iranian terrorism, U.S. policy hardened: it appears we now are actively encouraging the overthrow of the regime in Managua.

That means we are engaged in supporting the most overt "covert" war in our history. The question is not what our policy will be — that was answered in Mr. Reagan's re-election — but how we can pursue it in a way that advances our interests without corrupting our institutions.

The choices:

1. Continue to finance the war through the C.I.A., or through mid-dleman governments. "I still believe in covert programs where they are necessary and where they're desirable," President Reagan told The New York Times this week. In his State of the Union address, he asked Congress to continue "all facets" of aid to Central America — which includes covert money to the contras fighting against the Sandinistas who took over Nicaragua.

This invites the lying in high places that guarantees ultimate erosion of public support. Covert operations work best when planned in secret and executed swiftly; they work worst when the secret is out and the coup drags on.

The Administration last fall quietly

Who should fund the 'contras'?

pulled the rug out from under Republican senators fighting to provide funds for the contras; now that dog won't hunt. Nor will cushion-shot aid to the contras, using other aid recipients as cut-outs; that corrupts the foreign aid process, and plays into the hands of dovish opponents of the forthright overthrow policy who can attack the duplicitous way it must be carried out.

2. Bring the budgeted aid out in the open. "I can't think of anything worse than covert aid," says Senator David Durenberger, the Minnesota Republican who now heads the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. If he opposes covert aid, the C.I.A. money will not flow. He favors above-board aid to the contras combined with economic sanctions against the Sandinistas: "When [Reagan aides] say they can't do it openly, I come back and say 'Find a way to do it.'"

However, the effect of such outspoken interventionism is the triumph of the isolationists: openly paying the bills for the overthrow of a government is an act of war, and that requires a declaration of war by Congress. That will not happen. What happens instead is paralysis: the executive branch makes the commitments, and the legislative branch won't pay the bills.

3. Finance the war privately. An of-

ficial not new to covert operations, and promised anonymity, puts it plainly: "What are we talking about here, 14 million bucks? That's chicken feed. The private sector ought to be able to pick that up."

And so it should. Massive aid, like hundreds of millions to Afghanistan, demands secret government funding, but a nickel-and-dime war, such as now being effectively conducted against Managua, can be best handled by overt private contributions.

A "Freedom Fighters Fund," or some such entity, would have to be set up and run in a way that stays within the confines of our Neutrality Act; the aim should not be revolution, but to restore free elections. With Presidential blessing, and a big public fund-raising kickoff in Miami, fund-raising for humanitarian aid and organizational support should not be a great problem.

What about the inhumanitarian matter of buying guns? Such dealings would be handled separately, from money contributed to the guerrillas in the field by silent fat cats, in the time-honored way, supplemented by gifts of arms by organizations or countries menaced by the Sandinistas.

Private funding of the contras began when Congress squeezed off the public money last year. One rebel organizer is talking about a borrowing scheme, similar to Israel Bonds; competing ideas are sure to blossom. The trick for the contra-backers will be to attract a respected comptroller to assure contributors that their money gets where it should go.

Caveat: Taking the war private, and into the open, means less U.S. responsibility for, and control of, the fighters themselves. When we're ready to make a deal, they may want to go all the way. □